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AUTHOR Crawford, Mary; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Students who enrolled in women's studies courses at a college serving mainly students from working and lower middle class backgrounds were assessed for attitudes toward women and degree of sex-typing at the beginning and end of three women's studies courses. The study was conducted over three consecutive semesters in which 41 women and 6 men completed the Attitude Toward Women (ATW) Scale and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) during the first and last weeks of classes. In addition, individual interviews were conducted with male students during the first and last weeks of courses. Results of the BSRI showed changes in masculinity and feminity scores. Masculinity scores significantly decreased for men and increased for women who participated in women's studies classes, a change that represents decreasing sex-typing in both males and females. On the ATW Scale, attitudes toward women were liberal in both sexes (though more liberal in women) at pretesting and remained so. Structured interviews with male subjects were more sensitive than objective measures in revealing perceived changes in males. Results contribute to an understanding of attitude change as a function of exposure to information in an academic setting. (LH)

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ATTITUDE CHANGE IN WOMEN'S STUDIES COURSES: A FIELD STUDY

Mary Crawford, Mary McCullough, and Holly Arato

West Chester University

SO015 969

Paper presented at the National Women's Studies Association Conference (Columbus, OH, June 26-30, 1983).

Summary

Students who enrolled in Women's Studies courses at a state college were assessed for attitudes toward women and degree of sex-typing at the start and end of the courses. Male students were also interviewed individually. Results showed a decrease in stereotyped masculinity for men and an increase for women. Attitudes toward women were liberal in both sexes (though more liberal in women) at pre-testing and remained so. Interviews were more sensitive than objective measures in revealing perceived changes in males. Results contribute to an understanding of attitude change as a function of exposure to information in an academic setting.

ATTITUDE CHANGE IN WOMEN'S STUDIES COURSES: A FIELD STUDY

Mary Crawford, Mary McCullough, and Holly Arato

West Chester University

Women's studies -- the scholarly examination of women's history, societal roles, and relationship to culture -- has become an accepted part of the academic curriculum at many universities. Women's studies courses are unusual in that both instructors and students are often concerned not only with mastery of academic subject matter but with the possibility that attitudes toward women, other personal values, and even self-concept may change as a function of exposure to information presented in such classes (3). A small number of studies suggest that women sometimes change in self-concept, attitudes toward women, and assertiveness as a result of participation in women's studies courses (4,5,7). There is also evidence suggesting that women who enroll in such courses are more liberal than their peers to begin with, and that their women's studies experience leads to a strengthening of previously held beliefs and attitudes rather than an abrupt resocialization or "conversion" to liberal or feminist ideologies (3).

The present study was designed to assess attitude change as a function of participation in a representative sample of women's studies courses within a state university. A secondary goal was to gather data on male students, who constitute a small minority in women's studies classrooms and whose attitudes have not previously been examined. Our approach and its results are relevant not only to women's studies but to other courses which may

challenge deeply held values (for example, comparative religion, ethnic studies, or the psychology of prejudice) and, more broadly, to an understanding of attitude change as a function of exposure to information in an academic setting.

Method

The study was conducted at a 7,000-student state college serving mainly first-generation college students from working and lower middle class backgrounds. All students in all women's studies courses in which both men and women enrolled were the population of interest. The study was conducted over three consecutive semesters (1981-82). The courses included Women in Politics, Women in American History, and Psychology of Women. Two female and two male professors taught a total of five classes.

Objective measures used were the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (6) and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (1). The Attitudes Toward Women Scale measures attitudes toward the rights and roles of women in contemporary society, while the BSRI measures the individual's self-description on a set of sex-typed and neutral personality traits. A total of 41 women and 6 men completed the two inventories during the first and again during the last week of classes. In addition, individual interviews were conducted with male students during the first and again during the last week of classes. The open-ended interviews, conducted by a highly skilled clinician, were designed to tap aspects of attitudes toward self and toward women that might not emerge on the objective scales, and to allow richer analysis of motives, self-concept, and subjective feelings of change in the male students. Although the number of male subjects was very small, the inter-

views generated data that allowed comparisons to other researchers' interview data from women.

Results and Discussion

Results for the attitude scale measures will be described first, followed by a summary and analysis of interviews.

BSRI responses were scored by the median split method (2), which results in a categorization of each respondent as sex-typed, cross-sex-typed, non-sex-typed, or undifferentiated. The number of subjects in each category is shown in Table 1. The proportion of subjects classified as non-sex-typed is typical for a college-student population, but the proportion of sex-typed subjects is lower than that of Bem's norm group. The data suggest that change in self-concept occurred between pre- and post-testing. The nature of the change is clarified by Table 2, which shows changes in Masculinity and Femininity scores. Masculinity scores significantly decreased for men and increased for women as a function of participation in women's studies classes, a change that represents decreasing sex-typing in both males and females.

Insert Table 1 and Table 2 about here

Pre- and post-test scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale are shown in Table 3. Both female and male subjects scored as highly nontraditional (liberal) at pretesting. In addition, there was a significant sex difference, with women scoring as more liberal than men. The extent to which our students expressed nontraditional views at the start of their women's studies courses can be illustrated by a comparison with Spence and Helmreich's norm groups (6). Their subjects, from whom data were

gathered in 1971-72, showed a mean score for females of 98.21 (s = 23.16) and for males of 89.26 (s = 22.51). (Spence and Helmreich's norm groups also differed significantly from each other, with women more liberal than men.)

Insert Table 3 about here

Attitude change as a function of course participation can be assessed by comparing pre- and posttest scores, shown in the rows of Table 3. Female subjects showed a small (nonsignificant) tendency toward more liberal attitudes at posttesting, while males did not, although males' initial attitudes allowed for the possibility of more movement toward the liberal extreme than did the females'. Although the women subjects' trend toward more liberal attitudes did not reach significance, it may have represented a real change that was obscured by a "ceiling effect": perhaps the women subjects were near the limits of liberality that the ATW Scale can reliably measure.

Structured interviews with male subjects were used to gather information on the men's motives for enrolling in women's studies courses, their perceptions of how such courses might differ from other college courses, and their anticipation of possible changes in their self-concept and attitudes toward women. During initial interviews the men began by giving relatively defensive and superficial answers to the interviewer's questions. However, the interviewer used techniques of reflecting and clarifying the interviewee's statements of affect, and noted that all but one of the men began to show a different level of insight and active

(re)consideration of their process in the course, particularly during the second interview. The single exception (who later refused to complete the final interview) responded quickly and defensively throughout.

Five of the six men expressed a sincere interest in the course material and a desire to learn, suggesting a liberality of attitude consistent with their scores on the Spence - Helmreich scale and also observed in female subjects in this and other studies (3,5). When subjects were queried as to whether they anticipated personal change, most viewed intellectual gains but not personal change as likely.

The men who completed the final interview felt that the most important change they had experienced was the addition of a "knowledge base" to support their previously held liberal attitudes toward women's rights and place in contemporary society. However, contrary to their initial expectations, they also identified areas of personal growth. For example, answers to a question about unanticipated personal change included, "A whole new world has opened up to me; for the first time in my life I am able to accept women as my equal." All the subjects stated that their relationships with female friends, lovers, and family had changed over the course of the semester. All categorized themselves as having become either more understanding of or more emotionally expressive to women because of what they had learned.

The men also agreed on the importance of women's studies courses for males in general. They felt that such courses would help other men to be more emotionally expressive, more accepting of changing social roles, and to "....have a greater understand-

ing of the social needs, economic needs, sexual needs, plain old friendship needs" (of women).

Our results are consistent with research on female students in which interviews were also used to assess changes in self-concept and attitudes toward women following participation in a women's studies course. (3) The female subjects reported accepting qualities in themselves toward which they had previously been ambivalent, in particular their desires for independence and autonomy. (A similar change in our female subjects may be reflected in their increase in BSRI "masculinity".) For males in our study, the change was an increase in emotional expressiveness, also reflected in their decrease in BSRI "masculinity". Like the men studied here, women in previous studies also saw themselves as becoming more understanding and supportive of women's attempts to attain social equality.

Our interview results were consistent with the decrease in steretyped masculinity shown by the BSRI scores, and more sensitive than scores on the ATW scale in revealing male subjects' integration of their new knowledge about women's history, psychology, and participation in public life into their ongoing relationships with women as friends, co-workers, and partners. In related studies, previous researchers have also found interview data to be uniquely valuable (3).

An important conclusion to be drawn from the present research is that women's studies students are highly self-selected. They appear to choose women's studies not to be exposed to new viewpoints but to confirm and strengthen attitudes they already

hold. Their participation achieves those goals and sometimes results in unanticipated changes as well.

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Footnotes

Requests for reprints may be sent to Mary Crawford, Department of Psychology, West Chester University, West Chester PA 19383.

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	Females		Males	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Sex Typed	7	4	1	2
Cross Typed	7	5	1	3
Non-Sex-Typed	14	17	2	1
Undifferentiated	13	15	2	0

Table 1. Number of Subjects in Each BSRI category. (N = number of subjects completing all scales, not total number enrolled.)

	Females			Males		
	F Score	M Score	t	F Score	M Score	t
Pre	5.12 (.63)	4.93 (.77)	1.48 (n.s.)	5.75 (.68)	5.58 (.59)	.45 (n.s.)
Post	5.33 (.61)	5.05 (.69)	.61 (n.s.)	5.58 (.55)	5.39 (.42)	.54 (n.s.)
t	.26 (n.s.)	2.13 $p < .04$		.78 (n.s.)	2.83 $p < .04$	

Table 2. Mean Femininity and Masculinity Scores at Pre- and Post-Testing for Female and Male Subjects. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

	Pre	Post	t	p
Females	135.89 (14.90)	138.03 (13.60)	1.75	n.s. ($p < .09$)
Males	117.00 (18.97)	117.20 (15.45)	.08	n.s.
t	2.58 ($p < .01$)	2.33 ($p < .02$)		

Table 3. Mean Scores of Female and Male Subjects on the Attitude loward Women Scale at Pre- and Post-Testing. High scores indicate less traditional, more liberal attitudes. Standard deviations are in parentheses.